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DID YOU HEAR THAT?

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NORFOLK — The crackling blizzard of codes, numbers and abbreviations flying across Virginia's public safety airwaves may be clearing up.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine on Monday announced an effort to get the state's first responders and public safety personnel to use plain talk instead of codes.

In other words, he's asking police officers, firefighters and rescuers to just say "barking dog" instead of "10-49," "purse snatching" in place of "65P" or "arrest" rather than "ART."

It's designed to help agencies coordinate with one another in emergencies.

"Technologically, if you can all speak to each other, that's great," said Chris Essid, the commonwealth interoperability coordinator. "But if everyone's using different codes, you've got chaos."

Local scanner rats might have noticed that Norfolk police gave up 10-codes last year, joining Portsmouth and Virginia Beach in the land of plain talk (with some exceptions for officer safety). Chesapeake and Suffolk still use the codes.



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10-4 on your 10-20, or was that a 10-11?

Words can beat codes for first responder communications.

"Interoperability" is tough to say without stuttering. Since 9/11, stuttering has also accompanied efforts to achieve interoperability in the field, where first responders need to communicate effectively across departments, jurisdictions and even states when emergencies or catastrophic events occur.

A common-sense strategy announced this week by Gov. Tim Kaine offers one small but refreshing step forward.

The plan calls for the state's public safety employees to develop a common language in "plain English" for communications instead of relying on number codes -- such as 10-10 for "fight in progress" -- to describe emergency situations. Instead of 10-10, an officer could simply transmit, "Fight in progress."

Why would this plan help emergency responders communicate? Because local, regional and state public safety agencies often use different codes. For example, a 10-34 might alert authorities in one jurisdiction to a riot and in another jurisdiction signal, say, a coffee break.

Several first responder associations in Virginia have endorsed the plan and their support is a significant selling point. Jim Gordon, a spokesman for the American Federation of Police and Concerned Citizens, said Tuesday that relying on language instead of codes should enhance communication.

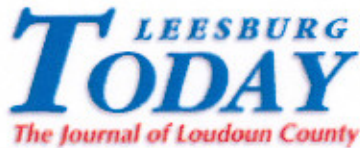
"There's nothing you can say in two or three words that won't be understood by other officers," he said. "It doesn't take but two words to say 'officer down.'"

The codes are a throwback to the 1950s, he said. And communications equipment today provides clarity of speech unheard of a few decades ago.

Unfortunately, clarity cannot transcend incompatible frequencies, training discrepancies and other barriers -- including the federal government's failure to make interoperability a national security priority. Adoption of a common language could help.

Turf spats, inadequate federal funding, frequency allocation struggles and other squabbles have slowed progress nationally toward interoperability. Virginia has done better. And the approach described by Kaine promises results instead of stalemate.

The state's first responders should get on board.

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Responders Move Toward NIMS Protocols

By Dan Telvock

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Loudoun's two largest law enforcement agencies, the state police, and the entire fire and rescue system are moving ahead with the state's goal of training all first responders and public safety personnel on the National Incident Management System, which is a common language all must use during emergency situations.

The change to a NIMS protocol is one of the results of a post-9/11 Virginia.

Gov. Timothy Kaine (D) last week announced progress in an effort to get Virginia's first responders and public safety personnel to shift to common language instead of more commonly used 10-codes in day-to-day operations and mutual aid events.

A 10 code is what law enforcement typically use. For example, a police officer who says over the radio that he is responding to a 10-50 means he is responding to a vehicle wreck.

The State Interoperability Executive Committee (SIEC) and Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator's Office (CICO) determined the common language protocol that allows the use of plain English for most transmissions.

"The use of coded language often can result in confusion and miscommunication because local, regional and state public safety agencies use different codes," stated Kaine in a prepared statement. "This is a problem especially during mutual aid incidents where multiple jurisdictions and disciplines must work together. Virginia is leading the way in reaching an understanding across our public safety community to take this significant step towards improved interoperability."

Loudoun County Sheriff's Office spokesman Kraig Troxell said all sworn deputies should be trained in NIMS by mid-2007. Approximately 50 percent of the sheriff's office's fields operations division has had some NIMS training. The agency's emergency response coordinator, Brian Courneya, is in the process of becoming a NIMS trainer. He explained NIMS as a common language for all emergency service agencies responding to the same incident. An incident command system directs people how to work a scene and the NIMS is the language all first responders use to run it.

"The big picture is when a large incident occurs anywhere in the National Capital Region, when we get called upon to respond, NIMS is going to be the management system," he said. "The incident command system will be in place and everybody will have to follow it. It is more efficient. You have better control. It is just an overall better system."

Courneya said originally the NIMS language came about because of the wild fires in California and the military used it often. But since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, NIMS was expanded to cover state agencies and law enforcement.

Deputy Chief Scott Cullers said that fire-rescue is NIMS compliant.

Leesburg Police Lt. Jeff Dub/ said all of the agency's employees have had introduction training to NIMS and it is currently taking FEMA classes for incident command for supervisors and basic incident command.

Loudoun County fire and rescue personnel used NIMS during a large-scale emergency operation during Labor Day weekend when a malfunction at Washington Gas caused too much of an additive that gives natural gas its odor to be released into the connections serving thousands of people. The response to more than 250 calls reporting the odor of gas during 52 hours required neighboring jurisdictions to assist.

While the National Incident Management System (NIMS) requires common language for mutual aid situations, Virginia recognizes responders will default to their training in high-stress situations. Virginia took NIMS requirements one step further by encouraging common language usage on a day-to-day basis for all responders.

"There will still be certain situations in which public safety professionals need coded language to do the job safely," said Col. W. Steven Flaherty, superintendent of the Virginia State Police. "But for the majority of incidents, the use of common language will be of great benefit for those responding to and managing a scene."

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